



## **War in Ukraine and India's Foreign Policy**

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### ***Abstract***

*The war in Ukraine started in 2014 escalated into a full-scale war in 2022. Ukraine is supported by the United States and NATO. This situation has posed several challenges for Indian foreign policy. Russia is an old friend and the United States is an important partner. The Indian vision of an international system founded by Nehru guides our approach to be ruled by law, institutions and cooperation where our aim is to work together with others. The problem arises with the behavior of Great Powers who prefer to teach law and ethics to others but do not feel the same need to guide their action by them. The aim of this paper is to give a brief account of the history, power politics and the causes and consequences of this war. The basic argument is that the internal crisis of Ukraine and international crisis between Great Powers have fed on each other and escalated into a war without end. The paper will discuss the way India has exercised agency and tried to maintain balance for order and justice in a system dominated by the Great Powers.*

**Keywords:** *War in Ukraine, Russia, India's Foreign Policy, NATO, Great Powers.*

### **Introduction**

The February 24<sup>th</sup> announcement of the 'special military operation' by Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine surprised and shocked many observers as nobody predicted a full-scale war between the two modern European states. The dominating view that direct war has become impossible between modern European states is challenged by the war in Ukraine. The conflict started with the Euromaidan protests in 2014 and experienced ebb and flow for around 8 years before escalating into full-scale war in 2022. Ukraine is seen as a flashpoint between Russia and the Western alliance and many labelled it as the return of the Cold War or new Cold War. The reason to associate it with the Cold War is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflects its imperial ambition, while the United States and its European allies have equally participated to provoke this war and have taken pledge to continue supplying defense and financial help to Ukraine. That increasingly makes it a war between Russia and the US/NATO with Ukraine as its theatre.

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This war has caused massive losses of life and property to many people but also provided gains to few elites. The changes in the international system has also posed several challenges for Indian foreign policy. Russia is an old friend and the United States is an important partner. The Indian vision of an international system founded by Nehru guides our approach to be ruled by law, institutions and cooperation where our aim is to work together with others. The problem arises with the behavior of great powers who do not feel the same need to rely on law and ethics and prefer only to teach them to others. The aim of this paper is to give a brief account of the history, power politics and the causes and consequences of this war. Ukraine is a heavily divided society pulled into two different directions (Russia and the West). The internal division within Ukraine and the international politics over Ukraine have added complexity to the conflict. The basic argument is that the internal crisis of Ukraine and international crisis between the powerful states have fed on each other and escalated into a war without end. Indian Foreign Policy has faced new challenges and compulsion due to the war and has tried to maintain balance for order and justice in a system dominated by the Great Powers.

### **Ukraine's Internal Divisions**

Ukrainian history is the history of a nation that has to survive and evolve without the “framework of full-fledged national state” (Subtelny, 2000). The beginning phrase of the national anthem of Ukraine says “The glory of Ukraine has not perished, nor the will” reflecting the resilience and indomitable will of Ukrainians. National story of Ukraine is a complex history of a region divided between different kingdoms, states, religious and political orientation. The word Ukraine is literally translated as “borderland” or “on the edge.” This can be interpreted either as a region on the borderland of Russia or also a country that is on edge of both Asia and Europe. Both Russia and Ukraine are relatively new words as both of them trace their history from the state of Kievan Rus. The Kievan Rus accepted Christianity in 988 AD and became the political, cultural, and economical center for Eastern Slavic people (Hosking, 2012). However, the division within Eastern Slavic people started developing after the decline of the Kievan Rus. The claim to be the true inheritor of the Kievan tradition was later contested between the Muscovy (1263-1547) in the East and the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia (1253- 1349) the West.

Russian and Ukrainian history developed into two different streams henceforth. Division was solidified with other political and religious separations. After developing separately from Muscovy, Ukraine was further divided into two different poles. The great schism led to the division between Latin Christendom and Orthodox Christianity. Ukraine from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was divided between the Russian Empire and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Western Ukraine is oriented westwards to Catholic Europe and influenced by the Kingdom of Poland and Hungary, the Habsburg Empire and others. Eastern Ukraine remains Orthodox and strongly influenced by the Russian Empire.

The Ukrainian rebels also known as Cossacks (mostly followers of Orthodox Christianity) often choose to have an alliance with the Russian Empire to fight against the Catholic Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. One of such prominent Ukrainian leaders was Bohdan

Khmelnitsky. He chose to have an alliance with Russia and signed the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654 and sought Russian protection by declaring his allegiance to the Tsar. This helped Ukraine to establish their own state called the Cossack Hetmanate. However, there were also leaders like Ivan Mazepa who chose to revolt against the Russian Empire and choose to have an alliance with Sweden and Poland. Surprisingly such complex divisions continue down this day in Ukraine. Ukraine's historian Orest Subtelny called Mazepa as one of the most "outstanding" leaders of Ukrainian history (Subtelny, 2000). On the contrary, Vladimir Putin in his article claimed that "Only a small portion of the Cossacks supported Mazepa's rebellion" (Putin, 2021). This division of allegiance was also prominent during the Russian Revolution. Between the world wars, Ukraine was divided between Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania (Reid, 2000). There were leaders like Stepan Bandera inspired from the Fascist movements and chose to have an alliance with Nazi Germany to resist against Russia. Different divisions appear in various ways again and again down to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Ukraine and appeared prominently during the Euromaidan protests.

### **Euromaidan Protests**

"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is a famous pronouncement of John Dalberg-Acton to describe the fact that powerful elites are often guilty of bribery, lobbying, nepotism and corruption around the world. The crisis in Ukraine can be traced back from the anti-corruption protests also known as the Orange Revolution in 2004. It started with a protest against the election of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich. Pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko supporters staged mass protests claiming that elections were rigged. Protestors marched towards parliament wearing orange and some also carried an orange flag that was the colour of the political party pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko. The Orange Revolution was a relatively peaceful movement but it had broader implications and challenged the Russian influence on Ukrainian politics by bringing pro Western president to power. After the second run-off, Yushchenko was declared winner and assumed power. Ten years later in 2014, pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich was again declared the winner. Yushchenko proved to be no less corrupt than Yanukovich. Both Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich proved to be highly discredited politicians. The only difference was that they represented interests of either the West or the Russian Federation. Euromaidan protests in Ukraine marked the escalation of the political crisis in 2014 when people in Ukraine gathered to protest against the then president Viktor Yanukovich. The main cause for protests is interpreted as his refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Ukrainians saw Yanukovich as someone working for Vladimir Putin. However, there were also counter protests to Euromaidan protests in the eastern part of Ukraine where the population was mostly in favor of alliance with Russia.

The Orange revolution did not destabilize Ukraine but during the Euromaidan protest, Western leaders' involvement along with Russia internationalized the dissatisfaction of the people concerning the socio-economic situation. A leaked phone conversation between American Under Secretary of State, Viktoriya Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey R. Pyatt, exposed the American intention to influence Ukrainian elections. The

transcript suggested that the United States had very clear ideas about what should be the outcome of Euromaidan protests (Marcus, 2014, BBC). Moreover, American senator John McCain also visited Ukraine to address protestors in Euromaidan. Having a corrupt government does not make Ukraine a unique state but politicians from a foreign country visiting and speaking to protestors made it a different case. The Russian administration took notice of both Orange Revolution and Euromaidan and interpreted them as a technique of the West to encourage anti-Russian non state actors, while for the West it was a protest of the ordinary Ukrainians demanding freedom. Ukraine and Russia lived together for decades and both faced the economic and political Challenge after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine was facing challenges of a new state and the people were frustrated by corruption and hoped for a change. It is not unusual for a state to have corrupt politicians but any state that collapsed due to the corruption of rulers can only be called a weak state. Russia emphasized on the “historical unity” of Russia and Ukraine in the past and at the same time Russia encouraged violent separatism in Luhansk and Donetsk. The crisis of developed manifolds due to the involvement of powerful states.

### **Russia’s Rationale**

Russian president Vladimir Putin once quoted Russian Emperor Alexander III that “Russia has only two allies, the armed force and the navy.” Russian in history has witnessed various events of destruction by the invaders from the outside. In 1237, Mongol invaders attacked the town of Suzdal. Napoleon also tried to invade and the image of German invasion of 1941 still haunts Russians. This made it natural to aspire for security from destructive and terrible assault across the flat open frontiers to the east and west. Security is a concern for all the modern nation-states irrespective of their territorial size or economic strength and Russia is no exception. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many predicted the beginning of a new era. The United States became the dominant power and unipolarity was seen as peaceful. China, Iran, Russia and others soon start developing as a potential hegemon in the international system. To maintain power requires countering the rise of any potential superpower. As a result the United States saw the organization such as NATO as a significant alliance to maintain hegemony. Even after the end of Soviet Union, NATO found an important place in Western strategy. Most popular explanation about Russian rationale is given by Western scholar John Mearsheimer. In an article published in the *Foreign Affairs*, Mearsheimer suggested that the United States led Western alliance share most of the responsibility for this war. “The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West” (Mearsheimer, 2014). Mearsheimer also invites readers to think about a hypothetical scenario of a Chinese defense force having an alliance in North America: “Imagine the American outrage if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico” (Mearsheimer, 2014). Russia is seeking to position itself as one of the great powers that requires it to strengthen its position in the post-Soviet space. Under Putin’s leadership Russia has waged war with Chechnya and Georgia and interfered in Syria. His experience with war has made him a confident invader. British political scientist Richard Sakwa also suggested that the Russian military do see NATO expansion as a threat. December 2014, Russia’s military doctrine approved by the Russian Security Council warned

against NATO expansion. “The strengthening of its military potential and its assumptions of global tasks and attempts to solve them in violation of international law” (Sakwa, 2017).

The two other factors that are part of the Russian Rationale to wage war are color revolution in post-Soviet states and Nazi revival in Ukraine. Deaths of civilians and soldiers have often been justified by misleadingly generalizing them as Nazis supporters. Russia has sought to justify the violence by labelling them as Bandera and Mazepa supporters. History of national struggle shows that genuine demands of any oppressed national group have been to either feel secure or achieve their own secure cultural and historical homeland. There are always diverse elements in these national groups and people with different political and cultural affiliations. There are some elements inspired from Nazism but they do not represent the worldview of Ukrainians as a whole. However, Russia saw the need to protect pro-Russian and Russian population threatened by the Ukrainian right wing. To keep Ukraine under its influence was also important for Russia to secure access to Black Sea naval base in Crimea. The geopolitical explanation that Ukraine is expected to be the neutral buffer zone is in agreement with the fact that Russia wants to avoid “eyeball to eyeball confrontation” with the West.

## **NATO**

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) - a European military alliance led by the United States - came into existence in 1949 as a counterweight to Soviet military presence in Eastern and Central Europe. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, it was expected that NATO would lose its relevance as well. Contrary to the expectation, NATO did not expire and worked as a military alliance with different operations. It was involved in Kuwait-Iraq war, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Afghanistan. NATO chose to add new members that were formally under the Soviet sphere of influence. Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland were admitted in 1999. The westernization trend of former Soviet states made Boris Yeltsin issue a statement that Russia feels a security threat from eastward expansion of NATO. It expanded further in 2004, adding seven east European states (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia).

Idea of NATO expansion proved to be the most provocative during the Bucharest Summit (or 20<sup>th</sup> NATO summit) in 2008. NATO announced that it “welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s aspiration for membership.” Vladimir Putin responded to this with a warning it will be seen by Russia as a “direct threat.” This was not the first warning issued by Putin. One year before the Bucharest Summit, Putin in the 2007 Munich Security Conference talked about the promise made by NATO in the 1990 that it will not expand in Eastern Europe. The warning soon turned into the Russia-Georgia war that was interpreted as the ruthless response of Russia against the eastward expansion of the NATO alliance. The 12 days war between Russia in Georgia was significant in serving as a warning to the international community about Russia’s emergence from the past weakness of the Soviet collapse. Despite warnings by experts about Russia’s problem with NATO expansion. No statement was ever issued by the Western leaders that NATO will no longer be expanded. NATO repeated the same Bucharest 2008 announcement 14 years later in November 2022 to add Ukraine as member. Experts and analysts from the West engaged in analysing and writing about the psyche of

Putin or declare him paranoid. Many said that he wants to restore the Soviet Union or Russian Empire but his own words about the NATO expansion remain ignored and trivialized. The American and its European alliance shifted gears and turned towards Ukraine from conflicts in Afghanistan and other places where they have been involved. Ukraine has still not been offered membership. Although the war has provided legitimacy to NATO as the alliance could now exist to manage the threat created by its own expansion. NATO survival as a military alliance has provided a boost to the military-industrial complex. The war revived the fortunes of NATO and helped NATO to become the top Western policy agenda.

### **India's Foreign Policy**

India after independence in 1947 faced the world divided into two poles of communism and capitalism. India was among the first countries that used the term 'non-alignment' and India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru was among the pioneers of the movement. Nehru said in his speech to the US congress in 1949, "Where freedom is menaced or justice is threatened or where aggression takes place, we cannot be and shall not be neutral" (Nehru, 1949). The Indian non-alignment position was based on the objective of "preservation of world peace and enlargement of human freedom" (Nehru, 1949). It was not the pledge of neutrality as India preserved the right to speak for the atrocities of the powerful against the weak.

The policy of non-alignment was challenged by conflict with neighbors Pakistan and China. The United States developed a close alliance with Pakistan and supplied weapons and also Pakistan allied with China to balance India. In 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War brought India into the Cold War confrontations. China and the United States refused to support the Bangladeshi resistance force Mukti Bahini. The partnership of the West with Pakistan and China made India to have good friendship with the Soviet Union. Most significant milestone in the Soviet- Indian relationship proved to be during the 1971 war with Pakistan. The United States aircraft carrier USS Enterprise was ordered by Nixon administration to target Indian Navy facilities and the UK Navy also started to move to synchronize with the United States to intimidate Indian forces. To help India, naval units from the Soviet fleet arrived in India. They were armed with "anti-ship cruise missiles capable of destroying U.S. warships and escorted by nuclear submarines" (The Hindu, Dec 19, 2019) and stopped Western forces from moving further. The partnership between the Soviet Union and India proved formidable to challenge the U.S. - Pakistan- China front.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, India lost the protective umbrella of the USSR's friendship. However, India in the 1990s started becoming one of the fastest growing economies and also acquired nuclear weapons. In the new realities of the post-Cold War period, India also opened itself to the rest of the world and aspires for a position at the top table. Ukraine and Russia are both former Soviet countries and India is trying to carry that legacy forward. India has friendly relations with Ukraine and both of the countries cooperate on trade, science and technology. India has signed strategic partnerships with many countries and exercises restraint and takes time to respond. This restraint was evident during the protests in Euromaidan in 2014, as there were no quick official statements coming from the

Indian government. And a tweet by the External Affairs Ministry spokesman started with the most often used phrase, “India’s is closely watching the situation and hoped for a peaceful resolution.” National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon issued a statement in March 2014:

“We hope that whatever internal issues there are within Ukraine are settled peacefully and that the broader issues of reconciling the various interests involved, There are legitimate Russian and other interests involved and we hope they are discussed and resolved” (Keck, 2014).

Russian president Putin thanked the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for his ‘restrained and objective’ stance on the issue. India also issued on March 2014 expressing concerns for Ukraine by stating that:

“India calls for sustained and sincere diplomatic efforts to ensure that issues between Ukraine and its neighboring countries are resolved through constructive dialogue. India hopes that a solution to Ukraine’s internal differences is found in a manner that meets the aspirations of all sections of Ukraine’s population...” (Madan, 2014)

India also congratulated the newly elected president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko on May 30, 2014. In the UN General Assembly vote that called Crimea’s reunification with Russia as illegal. Along with India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal ‘abstained’ from declaring Crimea reunification as illegal. India didn’t support the annexation of Crimea and tried to take a balanced stance by maintaining in its official statements that conflict should be resolved peacefully. Ukraine appreciated India for not supporting Russia’s claim over Crimea (Bhattacharjee, 2017). India did not take any strong position and preferred to maintain a healthy distance till the Russia and Ukraine war broke out.

### **India’s Response to Russia – Ukraine War**

The Indian position became a topic of debate and discussion after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. All the Western allies choose to condemn Russia. Hence, the aggression of Russia put India’s ties with the West through a stress test. In a meeting on 16 Nov 2022 in Uzbekistan, the Indian Prime Minister expressed his concern to Russian President Vladimir Putin by saying that “Today’s era is not an era of war” (The Wire, 2022). This was a significant moment as it disapproved of the Russian invasion of Ukraine without condemning Russia explicitly. India understands that Russia has genuine grievances on NATO expansion and the United States sitting on Ukraine. Russia is still a reliable supplier of defense equipment even after the addition of Israel, US and others as sellers to India. The United States threatened India with sanctions after India bought S-400 missiles from Russia in 2018. Since then Western observers have occasionally criticized India. For example, Janis Lazda, former policy advisor in the White House wrote an article questioning if India is still a country of Gandhi as it imports arms from Russia. In his opinion, “India has negated the effect of transatlantic energy sanctions” and funded Russia’s war machine” (Lazda, 2022). Russia also dominates exports of minerals, fuels, and oil and

distillation products to India. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar appropriately pointed out the hypocrisy of the West, in a meeting with the German foreign minister. In response to accusations that India is funding war by importing oil from Russia. He said,

“I think first we need to establish the facts very clearly. Between February 24 and November 17, the European Union has imported more fossil fuel from Russia than the next 10 countries combined. The oil import in the European Union is like six times what India has imported. Gas is infinite because we do not import it while the European Union imported 50 billion Euros worth (of gas)” (NDTV, 2022, June 2).

Jaishankar in his remark has positioned himself from the vantage point of developing and less developed nations. They are facing a shortage of food, fuel and fertilizer. Modi also in his meeting with Putin suggested that the major concerns of the world at present should be food and fuel security. The security concern of the countries in the Global South is not limited to securing citizens from violent conflicts but also safeguarding them from threats of hunger and unemployment that influence the quality of life. Russia’s increasing hostility towards the West has created conditions for an even closer alignment with China. This has complicated India’s geopolitical position and posed major challenges and compulsions in India’s Foreign Policy.

India has to find its strategic space amidst the strengthening of the Russia-China relationship alongside a breakdown in Russia-West relations. Former Indian diplomat Shiv Shankar Menon suggests that, with practical pragmatism, India has consistently argued that simultaneous engagement with both the US and Russia is essential for effectively managing China's rise (Menon, 2022). While the West has moved towards an anti-Russia agenda based on its understanding of its own interests, India has avoided following that path. However, this does not mean India underestimates the strength of its partnership with the West; instead, it avoids hasty decisions while monitoring Moscow’s actions and examining whether Russia continues to be an effective player in Eurasia. Given that Russia has been an important partner in the successful conduct of India’s foreign policy for decades, this caution is necessary, as India seeks to avoid alliances and instead cultivates multiple partners to further its national interest.

Open confrontation with the West means India has to be completely dependent upon Russia’s neutrality on issues involving China. Hence, India has avoided any hasty decision or provoking statement while monitoring the war. There was no public comment from India about the role of the United State and European alliance to fund non-state actors in Ukraine. Ever since the war started Indian interest has been to see peace established between the two warring nations. India has provided “12 consignments totaling 99.3 tons of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine” since February 24 (Indian Express, 2022, Dec 27). Just like Nehru’s vision, India is not completely neutral in the times of crisis. Empathizing with Ukrainians and not giving up trade relationships with Russia reflect a disjuncture of heart and mind. Heart recognizes the obligation to empathize with the oppressed and mind understands the benefits of buying oil at lower price from Russia. India has been walking a tightrope by being among

the few countries which are speaking to both sides.

### **Conclusion**

The Ukraine war is multidimensional: military, non-military as well as national and international. The crisis can be seen as multiple crises merging together. Ukrainian state weakness was developed due to the lack of consensus on state policy. Collapse of the Yanukovych government due to Euromaidan served as a reminder of the weakness of the state even after 23 years of independence and the matter is not yet settled. Having a corrupt government is a general problem of most of the modern states, but the corruption of the government leading to the collapse of the state proved to be something unique about Ukraine. Misinformation and propaganda is being used on both sides to make the world just an onlooker, standing at a distance as the war goes on. Ukraine's internal crisis and international crisis have exacerbated each other. The West had choose to ignore all the warnings given by Putin. Despite history of Russia's objection, NATO's persistence for expansion looks like a way of testing Russian response again and again. It has once again proved itself to be an important military alliance to safeguard Western interest. NATO has secured benefits in multiple ways.

The war has negatively impacted the world's food and energy security and put economies of various countries through recession. Ukraine and its people need humanitarian help, but the strategy so far has been to elongate the war rather than stopping it. Putin's attempt to mimic the United States by invading Ukraine might be proven foolhardy. Ukrainians have been isolated from Russia like never before. The war has intensified the process of making Ukraine more ethno-national, more Ukrainian and more anti-Russian. India is one of those countries that faced the challenge of balancing the two sides of war. West has often accused India of following its interests and not being guided by "shared values". India has not chosen to be neutral after the invasion. India remains a friend Russia without supporting its strategy in Ukraine. India recognizes the challenges being faced by Ukrainians and sympathizes with them. India still has a character of a principled and non-align country encourage peace through dialogue and diplomacy. India does not underestimate the strength of its partnership with the West. Both of them have to deal with rising China. From being excessively reticent before war, India also suggested Russians to do no harm. This balance is something that has convinced both Russia and the West that they can still count on India as an ally.

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